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Controlling Muskrats

Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service

controlling Muskrats

Developed cooperatively by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.

Muskrats make their homes by burrowing in banks or by building "houses" of rushes and other water plants. These burrows begin from 6 to 18 inches below the surface of the water, and penetrate the embankment on an upward slant. At distances up to 15 feet from the entrance, a dry chamber is hollowed out above the water level.

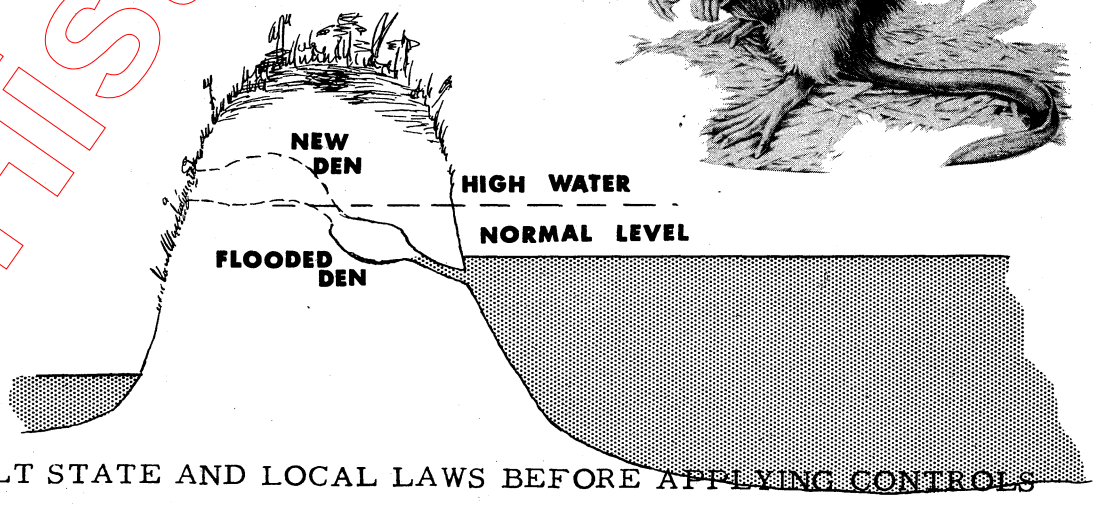
Muskrats are chiefly nocturnal. Their principal food includes, stems, roots, bulbs, and foliage of aquatic plants and they also feed on snails, mussels, crustaceans, insects, and fish. Several litters (usually 3 to 5), averaging 6 to 8 young per litter are produced each year.

While their average range may extend up to 200 yards, they will live and thrive in a much smaller pond or marsh. Occasionally muskrats wander over fields and along highways for considerable distances from water. (These migrations may occur in late fall, early spring, or during droughts.) Due to the value of muskrats for their fur, most states have regulations regarding the taking of these animals.

Control Measures

Once a muskrat den is dug, a rise in the water level causes the muskrats to dig further and higher to excavate a new dry chamber. The hazard is multiplied where woodchucks or other burrowing animals construct dens on the land side in close proximity to muskrat dens. Since a spillway should be able to handle a rapid rise in the pond level, competent engineering advice is desirable to insure proper construction.

Barriers, to prevent burrowing, offer the most practical protection to earthen structures. One of the best preventive measures is the use of sand or pea gravel. This is placed on the inner face of the dam to a depth of a foot or more, extending two or three feet above and below the water line. The sand or gravel caves in and thus discourages den building.



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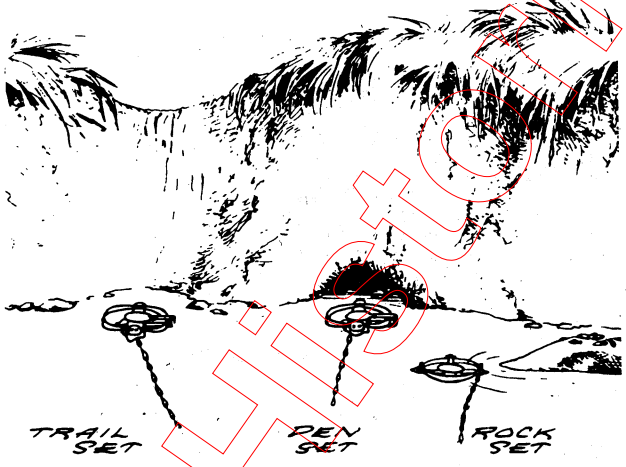
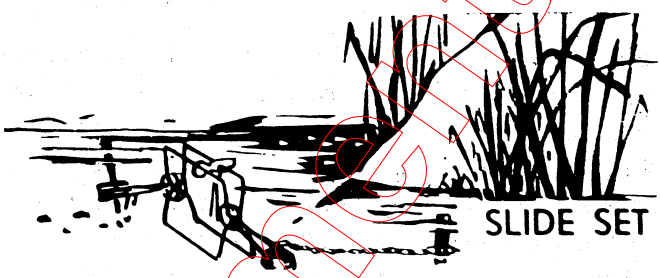
Another, and probably the most effective barrier, is asbestos cement board which is available in 4' x 8' sheets. It is set in the ground vertically as close as possible to the water's edge. The board should extend two feet above and two feet below the normal water line. A continuous smooth surface of asbestos board across the face of the dam would be impervious to gnawing. Hence, care should be taken in the installation of the board so that breaks and junction points will not present a gnawing edge.

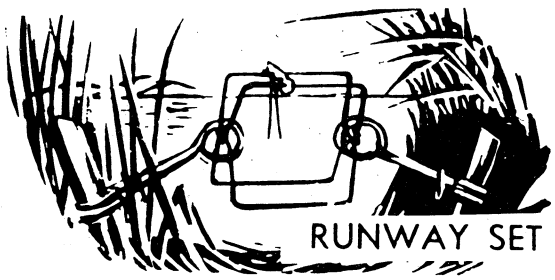
Trapping with steel traps is usually the most practical method of removing muskrats from a pond. Muskrats are not suspicious and are easily trapped. The ordinary No. 1 steel trap is effective, but some muskrat trappers favor the "two trigger" steel trap because it has double action and fewer rats seem to get away once they are caught. The new "Conibear" trap, as shown below, has proven effective for taking muskrats.



The manner of making trap sets depends upon the situation. The skill of the trapper is best displayed in selecting the trap sites. Muskrat trails may be found along the banks of streams and ponds which they inhabit and the practiced eye often can trace them into shallow water.



Sink the trap in the trail, partly in the mud or sand where the water is 2 or 3 inches deep, and fasten the chain to a stake. Fasten the bait (carrot, apple or parsnip) to a stick set in the mud so that the bait is about a foot above the pan of the trap. The animal, in reaching for the bait, sets its foot upon the pan and is caught. Unless the animal drowns soon after being caught, it is likely to twist its leg off and escape. For this reason the stake to which the chain is attached should be placed in water at least a foot deep. Traps set on floats, either natural objects or rafts, have proven successful. If practical, trapping should be done when the fur is prime so that full value may be obtained from the pelt.



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